

# The Holocaust Historiography Project

Admissions against Interest about the Holocaust

## Another Holocaust liar

### Survivor's story raises some doubts

Area Jewish groups question her details in Holocaust account

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For more than a decade, [Deli Strummer](#) was one of Baltimore's most active public speakers on the Holocaust. In schools, in churches and even on local television, she captivated audiences with harrowing descriptions of concentration camp life and narrow escapes from death.

But there is a problem: Her story is not completely true.

Now, citing a review by top Holocaust experts that exposed innumerable inaccuracies in Strummer's oft-told accounts, the influential Baltimore Jewish Council has removed the 78-year-old Towson woman from its list of recommended speakers on the Holocaust and has advised area schools to do the same.

"We owe it to the memory of the six million slaughtered and the survivors that their stories be represented as accurately as possible," said Arthur Abramson, executive director of the Baltimore Jewish Council, the community relations and political arm of The Associated Jewish Community Federation of Baltimore.

"This is an attempt at getting to the truth, at making sure we give no ammunition to the deniers of the Holocaust, and making sure that children are given the historical truth."

Strummer acknowledges making minor errors but remains adamant about the truthfulness of her account.

The experts who reviewed Strummer's story and relevant historical records say she probably was a captive of the Nazis. Lawrence L. Langer, an expert in Holocaust testimony, said, "My hunch is 95 percent that she is Adele Aufrichtig," the woman she says she is, who was deported from Vienna in 1943.

But dozens of details in the account are impossible or highly unlikely, he said.

"I've seen interviews with people who embellished their stories," he said. "But nothing like this. I've never encountered anyone who invented stories. You don't need to."

Strummer, in an emotional interview this week, acknowledged "innocent errors, inconsistencies" in the dates she has given in her accounts, but insisted that her mistakes are relatively inconsequential and easy to correct in future talks.

Her story, she said, "poured out of me. I didn't think about timing. ... All I wanted was to tell the world, please don't let this happen again."

The heart of her story - surviving beatings, torture and starvation at the hands of the Nazis - is true, she says. Its essential elements are corroborated by a woman who lived through the Holocaust with her, Nita Adler, who said in an interview that Strummer saved her life.

Strummer considers it her mission to keep talking about her experience.

"God saved me. He saved me out of a hellish, hellish time," she said, her English thick with the accent of her native Vienna. "I speak from my heart. I speak from my experience. I use this for hope and peace."

Jewish Council officials say they are perplexed by the question of why someone might embellish one of the greatest horrors of human history. Abramson said there is no indication of a financial motive, adding that she often contributed her honoraria to the Jewish Council.

The conflict over Strummer's account, which has been kept under wraps since it began six months ago, presents a thorny problem for the council, which has supported her speaking activities for at least 12 years.

During that time, Strummer has told her story to thousands of people in the Baltimore area and beyond through a self-published book, in interviews with newspapers such as The Sun, in videotaped interviews for two renowned Holocaust libraries and in two documentaries.

Three years ago, she waved an American flag while riding in a red convertible in Towson's Fourth of July parade, where she was honored

as a community "champion." The most recent documentary, aired last November on WMAR-TV, raised questions which triggered the council's review.

While stressing that the matter remains under investigation, officials in the Baltimore Jewish Council recently outlined the errors that led them to take action:

\*Strummer originally said she spent 4 1/2 years in concentration and death camps, beginning in 1941 when she was taken from Vienna to Theresienstadt in Czechoslovakia and ending with her liberation from Mauthausen in Austria in 1945.

She now acknowledges that she probably spent roughly two years in captivity, the bulk of it in Theresienstadt, a huge 18th-century fortress that the Nazis converted into a Jewish ghetto. From there, many Jews were sent to concentration camps.

The discrepancy came about, Strummer said, because she originally miscalculated the year she was deported from Vienna. She thought it was 1941, not the actual 1943. She says she still isn't completely certain of the dates.

\*Strummer has said in the past that she spent nine months in Auschwitz, perhaps the most lethal Nazi camp. Experts who reviewed records concluded that if she was in Auschwitz, it was for no more than eight days. Strummer now says she was probably in Auschwitz for about three weeks.

\*Strummer has said she was repeatedly brought into a room at Auschwitz with nozzles on the wall and human bones on the floor, where her group awaited "our captors' choice. Would those nozzles spray water, or deadly gas?"

Experts say the story is inaccurate. The showers and gas chambers were separate facilities. And historian Raul Hilberg, who reviewed Strummer's story, said the claim of seeing bones apparently was "invented." He said research shows it would have been impossible for her to see bones in a shower, or even a gas chamber if she were ever in one.

\*Strummer describes Nazi guards at Auschwitz lining up children and shooting them for target practice in front of their mothers - a statement she still stands by even though Langer calls it "highly unlikely."

\*In Mauthausen, Strummer describes watching prisoners being pushed down a flight of stairs toward a pack of starved German shepherds, then seeing a pile of human remains several days later. Langer says there's nothing in the historical record that mentions the use of dogs as a killing method at Mauthausen. Strummer now says that although she remembers seeing the dogs attacking prisoners, she's no longer sure of the meaning of what she saw, and has stopped talking about the dogs in public.

\*Strummer describes being next in line for the gas chamber at Mauthausen on May 5, 1945, when American soldiers liberated the camp. In her book and in interviews, she describes a dramatic scene of a white flag waving, an American flag waving, the door to the gas chamber flying open and naked people running out gasping for air, "sending the odor of death into the air."

Records from the camp show that the last gassing at Mauthausen took place April 28, a week before liberation day. The experts say there is no record of anyone coming out of a gas chamber alive. Besides, Nazi guards had already fled by the time the Americans arrived, Langer said. Strummer now says that she was only describing what she saw, and at the time she thought the gas chamber was in operation.

\*In various places, Strummer has said her father was general in the Austrian army during World War I. After she was told that such a rank would be impossible for someone so young, she acknowledged it was a mistake.

Strummer, who emigrated from Vienna after the war, said it was natural to mix up dates under extreme stress. "When you went through those concentration camps, you didn't know whether it was February or March, morning or night."

She says she's "disgusted" that people who did not live through concentration camps are using "so-called evidence" from history books to challenge her story.

"I am hurt as a person," she said. "I think I blame more the people who call themselves historians. Historians are very important people, but the historians concern themselves with world affairs. When it comes to the atrocities, the cruelty and the punishment of the concentration camps, they don't know."

Sitting in the dining room of her Glendale home Monday, her bichon frise, Mack, at her feet, Strummer cried quietly as she complained that she feels betrayed by the Jewish Council, the very organization that she so faithfully served.

"Day and night, 'Deli, we need you here.' I was their servant," she recalled. "I've been doing this for 20 years. The council for 12 years supported my book. My life is an open book for 20 years.

"What is the hurting point is they carry my religion. You shouldn't be accused by your own people," she said.

She has spent most of her adult life in the medical profession, first as a nurse in Vienna, then - after the war - in New York and later at Sinai Hospital in Baltimore, where she was a medical research associate. She also worked as a facilitator, counseling widows and widowers.

Those who know Strummer describe a passionate, well-meaning person who enjoys the spotlight.

"She's not an intellectual," said Harold Smullian, the producer of "From Out of Ashes: The Deli Strummer Story," a documentary that aired in November on WMAR. "She's not a historian. She has an ego, yes. She wants to get up and speak."

When she does, she describes in dramatic flourishes a life that includes a brief marriage in a concentration camp - her husband was transferred by the Nazis, never to be seen again - and, eventually, a new start in the United States.

Strummer attributes much of the controversy to jealousy of the attention she's received. She says she knows that some people have called her a fraud behind her back, questioning whether she really is Adele Aufrichtig (German for "sincere" or "honest"), born in Vienna in 1922 to a Jewish father and Christian mother.

Officials from the council say they can't answer that question - they've been unable to document that Strummer is indeed Adele Aufrichtig. Two documents from Theresienstadt show that someone by that name probably perished during the Holocaust, officials said. But another record obtained by the Jewish Council shows that an Adele Aufrichtig arrived in the Flossenberg camp in 1944. Council officials say they've asked Strummer for "objective" sources in Vienna who could confirm her identity but have not received them.

Nita Adler, who lives in New York, and lived through the camps with Strummer, says she's a witness to much of Strummer's story. Strummer frequently mentions Adler in her accounts.

Adler said Strummer saved her life, passing up a chance to possibly escape from a rail car because she was committed to taking care of her. "She stayed with me," Adler said. "If it was not for Deli Strummer, I would not be here. ...Whatever is in the book, that is the story."

Smullian, the documentary producer, said he met Strummer's brother and sister in Europe, and has no doubt that she is the woman who went to the camps as Adele Aufrichtig.

The Jewish Council started its speakers bureau 12 years ago to promote Holocaust education and remembrance, and Strummer had become one of its most active speakers. Many survivors are reluctant to relive their nightmares in public. Some can't sleep or eat the day before they speak, and some break down in tears afterward.

But Strummer was always willing.

She also published a book, "A Personal Reflection of the Holocaust," and was videotaped for the Survivors of the Shoah Visual History Foundation, Steven Spielberg's archive of 50,000 interviews with Holocaust survivors. Another taped interview is on file at Yale University's Fortunoff Video Archive for Holocaust Testimonies.

So, when a few other survivors quietly said parts of Strummer's story didn't ring true, Jewish Council officials let it go. Maybe people were a little jealous, they thought.

"More than one of them said to me it couldn't have happened that way," Abramson said. "But these people have gone through the worst kind of hell on earth. You don't want to persecute a survivor. You don't say we have to launch a thorough investigation. You don't do that with this issue."

But looking back over his 21 years in this line of work in various parts of the country, Abramson said, "What makes it unusual is there's not one [other] incident where any survivor came to me challenging the story of another survivor. Ever."

In the spring of last year, Strummer and the producer of her recent documentary asked the Jewish Council to endorse the film project and help prepare an accompanying guide for use in schools.

Officials at the council who reviewed the documentary had concerns about its graphic footage and historical authenticity, and offered to bring in Holocaust experts to review it. Strummer agreed.

The council searched for the best names in the field and came up with Langer, a professor emeritus of English at Simmons College who has interviewed 60 to 70 survivors and watched the testimony of several hundred more, and who is "a major figure" in survivor's testimony and "a good example of the self-policing in the field," according to Irving Greenberg, chairman of the board of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum.

Langer suggested that a historian be consulted, so the council brought in Hilberg, a retired University of Vermont professor whom Greenberg described as "the pioneer researcher" on the subject and "one of the greatest scholars in the world" in Holocaust studies.

They reviewed the film, and Strummer's book and videotaped interviews, and spoke with Strummer. They concluded immediately that there were significant problems.

"Everybody was hoping what would come out of this would be authentication of her story and unfortunately that was not the way it played out," Abramson said.

The council notified leaders at local public, private and parochial schools, along with the Holocaust Museum in Washington, but asked

them to keep it quiet.

"I was stunned, absolutely stunned," said Rex M. Shepard, supervisor for social studies for Baltimore County middle and high schools. "When people were looking for survivors to speak, she was one of the most popular choices.

"She was exceptionally skilled at describing the personal impact and the pain she felt. ... I've never met anyone who wasn't moved by her and wasn't almost overpowered by her testimony."

John Kozora, the former principal at Marley Middle School - where Strummer has been speaking for at least a decade - said he hopes students absorbed Strummer's lesson regardless of questions about the details.

"Her message wasn't one of hate or distaste for the German people," he said. "Her message was one of love and respect for our country, and one of gratitude."

The doubts about Strummer's account bring up a range of sensitive issues for the Jewish community.

"We are in a discipline where quality control is poor," said Hilberg, the historian. "There's nobody who proofreads these things or certifies these things as being credible."

He noted a recent controversy where the book "Fragments" was withdrawn from stores after critics charged that the author had spent his early childhood in Switzerland, not in a concentration camp in Poland as he'd claimed.

Rubin Sztajer, 74, of Pikesville, a Holocaust survivor, worries that the distortions erode witnesses' credibility. "It's going to hurt," said the retired dry goods salesman, who was a teen-ager when the Germans snatched him from his family's home in Klobuck, Poland. His parents and three of his siblings perished. "It lets the deniers be able to say, 'I told you so. They're making up their stories.' Even things we're literally crying our hearts out about."

Sztajer, who has been speaking publicly about the Holocaust for the past two decades and had appeared with Strummer, said there had been discussions about her story among survivors. He would not say whether he went to the Jewish Council with his concerns.

Greenberg of the Holocaust museum said that documents are invaluable in understanding Holocaust history but nothing is as powerful as survivor testimony. Because of that, he said, it's even more important to make sure stories are accurate. Abramson said the council is now more carefully scrutinizing the stories of survivors it sanctions as speakers.

Despite what the council calls a verbal agreement with Strummer not to talk about the Holocaust at schools, Strummer has no intention of stopping. Within the past few weeks, she has spoken at Marley Middle School in Anne Arundel County and at Park School's middle school, where educators were apparently unaware of the council's actions.

"There's only one power who can stop me. Not the Jewish Council. Not The Associated," she said. "I gave a promise to God that if I should live, this is what I will do.

"I will do this as long as anyone wants to listen to me."

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